

Three Things I Learned from my Undergrad

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Tiffany is a second-year PhD student at the University of Alberta. Here, she shares three pieces of advice for undergraduate students getting started in research.

1. Try many types of labs!

For most of my undergrad, I worked with animal models (fish, mice, and rats), which meant lab coats and gloves every day. However, in my third year, I was able to work with people for the first time through DAAD¹. Trying new research modalities allowed me to experience different lab environments and work-life balances as a researcher. Through this, I was able to determine a personal preference for wet lab work. While conventional wisdom may advise students to finish their work as fast as possible, I found the experience of working in multiple labs helpful in figuring out what sort of researcher I wanted to be!



2. Treat your research with sincerity

One of the main reasons I was able to work in so many labs and receive funding for my later undergrad research was due to letters of recommendation from my professors. Leaving a good impression on your graduate supervisors and professors is so important, regardless of what that letter of recommendation will be used for! The reason you're in research is not as important as your attitude towards your research; an eager student who is diligent and serious towards their work is always going to be viewed favourably. You have one opportunity to establish a reputation for yourself, so make sure it's something that reflects your character well.

3. Go abroad!

As COVID-19 restrictions open up and travel becomes more accessible, the beginning of summer is the perfect time to consider research abroad. If you can fit it into your schedule, I highly recommend it, even if it means one less year spent in your 'main' research lab. Many countries have study abroad opportunities available to students at Canadian universities (e.g., China, Germany, Singapore, Switzerland, etc.). Many of these competitions don't even require you to be a citizen or permanent resident! The UAlberta GoAbroad fair has a number of these opportunities collated into one place for you. Mitacs Globalink², DAAD¹, CLIC³, and Killam⁴ are all examples of programs that will fund you for your trip. Consider where you'd be interested in going, then investigate application files and previously accepted applicants online to see what you should be preparing for your future application! Remember that these experiences are there for you to visit the country and travel as much as they are for research. Spend your weekends exploring and experience a new culture.

Ultimately, your undergraduate experience is just the beginning of your career, and the most important aspect is to glean as much as you're able to from it! I hope you found my experiences helpful, but my biggest piece of advice to students is to put your mental health first, and take care of yourselves in these difficult times.

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¹DAAD – Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (German Academic Exchange Service)

²Mitacs Globalink

³CLIC – Canada Learning Initiative in China

⁴Killam – Killam Fellowships